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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 000276

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NSC FOR PHU

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TAGS: PGOV PINR TH

SUBJECT: BIO OF THAI PRIME MINISTER SAMAK SUNDARAVEJ

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(SBU) The House of Representatives on January 28 elected People's Power Party leader Samak Sundaravej as Thailand's 33rd Prime Minister. (Note: Only 24 other individuals have held the post; some served multiple, nonconsecutive terms. End Note.) Post offers the following unclassified biography of Samak; septel will provide analysis of his election.

BEGIN BIOGRAPHY

SAMAK SUNDARAVEJ

(Phonetic: SAH-mahk SOON-tor-rah-wet)

Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Thailand

The House of Representatives elected Samak Sundaravej as Thailand's 33rd Prime Minister on January 28, 2008. Samak won election after the People's Power Party (PPP), which he heads, won a significant plurality in December 2007 legislative elections. The People's Power Party campaigned on a populist platform devoted to continuing the programs of the disbanded Thai Rak Thai party. PPP has also been widely seen as loyal to deposed Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who explicitly endorsed PPP in late 2007. In August of 2007, Samak publicly described himself as a "nominee" of Thaksin.

Samak was Governor of Bangkok from 2000 until 2004. As Governor, he had ambitious plans for innovative housing and transportation projects, but he scored few successes. As of January 2008, he remained under investigation for alleged bidding collusion relating to city garbage disposal contracts, and for alleged financial improprieties related to the city's purchase of fire trucks from Austrian firm Steyr Daimler Puch. Following his term as Governor, Samak was elected as a non-partisan figure to the Senate in 2006, but the September 2006 coup d'etat resulted in the abolition of the Senate before its newly-elected members could be inaugurated.

Prior to becoming Governor, Samak had won election as a Bangkok member of the House of Representatives 10 times, from 1975 to 1996. He also held various cabinet positions, including four appointments as Deputy Prime Minister in the early- and mid-1990's. He was Deputy PM in 1992, during the brief government of coup leader General Suchinda Kraprayoon; according to press reports, Samak defended the government's shooting of students in the "Black May" demonstrations. In the 1980's and early 1990's he served twice as Transportation Minister. He served briefly as Interior Minister in the government installed following the 1976 military coup.

Samak joined the Democrat Party in the late 1960's; he left the Democrat Party in the late 1970's and founded the Thai Citizen Party (TCP), which remained his political vehicle until the end of his term as Governor of Bangkok, although he resigned as Party Leader in 2001. (TCP now is under the leadership of Samak's younger brother, Sumit Sundaravej; TCP failed to win seats in the House in the 2007 election.) Samak became Party Leader of the newly-formed PPP in August 2007.

Most Thais characterize Samak as a royalist and right-wing figure. His father was a Palace official, and Samak has enjoyed close ties to both the Palace and the military. He was staunchly and vocally anti-communist in the 1970's, and he called publicly for the use of harsh measures to suppress Thailand's communist movement.

In the 1950's and early 1960's, prior to entering politics, Samak wrote political commentary for Siam Rath newspaper. He also worked as a public relations officer at the Israeli Embassy in Bangkok. After his term as Bangkok Governor, Samak co-hosted talk shows on television and radio; his shows

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were widely criticized as politically divisive. Samak also hosted a cooking show on television in recent years.

Samak is outspoken and prone to blunt remarks. He was convicted of defamation in at least four separate lawsuits from 1989 to 1993. More recently, in April 2007, Samak was sentenced to 24 months' imprisonment after conviction on four counts of defaming then-Bangkok Vice Governor Samat Ratchaphonlasit, by accusing Samat of corruption. Samak has remained free on bail while appealing this verdict; it is unclear when the Court of Appeals will rule on the matter.

Samak was born on June 13, 1935 and was educated in Bangkok, at St. Gabriel School, Assumption Commercial College, and Thammasat University. In 1968, he received a diploma in business administration from Bryan and Stratton College in Chicago. He has a functional command of English. Samak is widely known to be fond of cats and cooking.

Samak's wife, Khunying Surat Sundaravej, has a professional association with the Charoen Pokphand agribusiness conglomerate. The Sundaravejs have two daughters, one of whom works with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

END BIOGRAPHY

JOHN